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The Absent Father in Jane Eyre

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The Absent Father in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1848), functions as a *bildungsroman* novel as it follows the spiritual, psychological, and moral development of Jane from childhood to adulthood. The narrative, structured as an autobiography, follows the life of young Jane Eyre and the lives of the women surrounding her, which Brontë uses to describe the system of patriarchy employed by English society and the injustices women receive through patriarchal repression. Patricia Ingham, editor of *Oxford World's Classics Authors in Context: The Brontës*, explains, "The way that society was structured left few options for women and built perceived inferiority into the system, with many articles and conduct books to reinforce this characterization of women's nature, which frequently seemed the norm even for the women themselves" (Ingham 51). In order to call attention to this system of patriarchy and call for a feminist reform of Victorian England women's rights in society and religion, Brontë contrasts the diverse lives of female characters in the novel by portraying the long-term effects of the presence or absence of a father figure. The urgency of this type of reform is emphasized by the hardships that women, such as Jane Eyre, the Reed sisters, Adèle Varens, Blanche Ingram, and Rosamond Oliver, face due to the lack of "patriarchal protection."

The Victorian England described by Ingham was a hierarchal society in which "superior status depended on inherited rank, ownership of land, or practice in certain professions" (44). In this society, the nature and roles of women were innately second-class, built on the perceptions of women's inferiority and revolved around the goal of marriage. Even the education of women focused on making them more marriageable by teaching them "accomplishments" like painting, drawing, or French, rather than classic literature and advanced arithmetic (Ingham 53). Before marriage, women had very few working options that were limited based on their class. The typical jobs a woman may be employed in included working as

dressmakers and teachers. Mary Poovey, author of *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, claims that "private teaching was widely considered the most genteel, largely because the governess's work was so similar to that of the female norm, the middle-class mother" (127). Although women did not receive high wages working as governesses, they were able to keep the money they earned, for this was considered a stepping stone on the way to marriage. According to Ingham, women's lives after marriage reduced what few rights that they had when working: "Ironically when women did achieve their main purpose—marriage—they became not first-class persons but nonpersons" (51). However, marriage was the most suitable of the options women had because it offered patriarchal protection not only emotionally and spiritually, but in the most literal sense. Marriage offered women the opportunity to live comfortably, to feel relatively safe, and to be financially secure in ways that single women were unable to achieve. This is the society that Brontë's characters function within and rebel against in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

Lacking that patriarchal protection as an orphan, Jane is first introduced to the reader as "a vulnerable, mistreated child" (Glen 157). Living with relatives after the death of her parents, ten-year-old Jane is falsely accused of being "naughty," "passionate," and "deceitful" (Brontë 47-49). Orphan Jane is raised alongside John, Eliza, and Georgianna Reed, her cousins, at Gateshead Hall as a fulfillment of their father's final request of his wife. As a result, Jane's childhood at Gateshead Hall is spent very separate from the other children; she suffers from a great deal of abuse and neglect. This occurs due to Jane's lack of patriarchal protection, which would have established her financially and socially. Jane's inability to establish her place in society and lack of personal wealth makes her a dependent of Mrs. Reed, her benefactress and only known living relation. Robert Keefe, the author of *Charlotte Brontë's World of Death,* identifies Jane's experiences at Gateshead as the driving

force behind “the beginning of Jane Eyre’s spiritual journey” (108). This is what allows the novel to act as a *bildungsroman* and introduces Jane’s interrogation of women’s roles in English society. Jane’s experience as a dependent at Gateshead also establishes and emphasizes the detrimental repercussions resulting from the lack of a father figure.

In an attempt to reduce Jane’s social status, Mrs. Reed has taken on the role of Jane’s benefactress, deliberately placing Jane in a position of little power or opportunity. Mrs. Reed allows Jane to be abused and neglected, even encouraging the children to shun Jane for no reason other than she wanted Jane to “[endeavor] in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner, — something lighter, franker, more natural” (Brontë 20). It can be argued that Mrs. Reed allows this to occur for the following two reasons: the lack of patriarchal protection in the form of a guardian for Jane and the threat Jane poses to the marriageability of Eliza and Georgianna. However, the brunt of the abuse Jane faces during her early childhood stems not from the ostracism encouraged by the feminine authority of Mrs. Reed, but from her cousin, John Reed. Helene Moglen writes about this in her book *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived,* claiming, “It is from John Reed, the violent, spoiled, bullying son that she learns most painfully what it means to be poor and dependent in a world which respects wealth and position. It is from John that she learns the meaning of powerlessness, the meaning of being a female in a patriarchal society” (109). This sense of resentment towards the Reed family and powerlessness at the injustices she has experienced are what drive Jane to retaliate against John’s final attack. As a result of her outburst, Jane is locked in the “Red Room” where Mr. Reed had died, and, convinced that his ghost possessed the room, experiences a fit of nerves and emotion that causes her to pass out. The locking away of Jane represents a stripping away of the rights she would possess as a member of the same class as the Reeds

and implies that Jane herself has been stripped down to a lower class because of her position as a dependent. The ghost of Mr. Reed, as well as his death in the "Red Room," represents the shadow of what might have been for Jane before her loss of patriarchal protection and the final step in Jane's fall within society. This functions as a call to reform.

Later in the novel, Jane rebels against the very society that would have her lowered in class standing by acting out in ways women were not expected to present themselves. She does this through another series of outbursts. Jane's first outburst following the "Red Room" incident occurs following Mrs. Reed's false account of Jane's character to Mr. Brocklehurst, the superintendent of Lowood Institute, a charity-school for girls. Angered by the injustice, Jane cries out to Mrs. Reed, "What would uncle Reed say to you, if he were alive?" (Brontë 39). Here, Jane reminds Mrs. Reed of the patriarchal figure who demanded the protection of Jane. She continues, "My uncle Reed is in heaven, and can see all you do and think; and so can papa and mama: they know how you shut me up all day long, and how you wish me dead" (Brontë 39). This comment emphasizes the injustice of Jane's surroundings and functions as a call to reform the rights of female orphans, stressing Jane's lack of options in the situation. Brontë extends this call to reform through Jane's experiences at Lowood Institution where she is humiliated and unjustly punished early into her education by Mr. Brocklehurst. On the surface, Jane is only punished for dropping a slate; looking deeper, it can be seen that Mr. Brocklehurst's punishment is actually an act of godlike judgment. Moglen claims that Brocklehurst's actions are similar to those of John Reed, stating, "John Reed's crude snobbishness and bullying become, through Brocklehurst's misuse of power, institutionalized oppression motivated by class and sexual bias" (112). The actions of Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst are only possible as a result of the death of Jane's parents, or more importantly, her father. The emphasis on Jane's lack of

father figure to combat these attacks examines the vulnerability and victimization of young women while stressing the urgency and importance of women's reliance on male figures for protection in Victorian society.

In addition to the blatant abuse, Jane suffers personally at the hand of Brocklehurst, she and the rest of the students face the physical abuse and neglect of life at Lowood. The institution as a whole is underfunded and neglected by its benefactors: the teachers are forced to serve their pupils burnt porridge and small portions of food; the students wear thin, threadbare clothing unsuitable for the weather; and the building is perpetually cold enough to freeze the water the girls wash in. Sandra Gilbert, author of "*Jane Eyre* and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking," explains the actions of Brocklehurst as a "grotesque parody of Christianity [in which] he punishes the bodies of the girls at Lowood with the ostensible goal of saving their souls, in the process murdering a number of them en masse" (111). Because the atrocious conditions of the institution are delivered in the form of an autobiography, this also serves as a call to reform. It has been argued that Jane's experience at the school mirror those of Brontë's personal experiences at the Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge. The importance of the institution in examining the detrimental consequences for young women lacking patriarchal protection lies in the negligence the young women of Lowood experience. Because these women, like Jane, most often had no father figures, there was no one to fight for them or to hold the institution accountable. In essence, the girls were viewed as expendable because they had no men to answer for them.

Jane's early childhood experiences are contrasted with the experiences of Eliza and Georgianna Reed, who are also raised without a father. Unlike Jane, the lack of patriarchal protection does not leave the Reed sisters unable to establish their place in society. This is because of the financial security left behind by their father and secured by the presence of their brother, John Reed, the heir of the family

due to primogeniture. Despite John Reed's crude snobbishness, constant bullying, and eventual distance from the rest of his family as an adult, he still represents patriarchal protection and takes the place of the absent father figure in the family. However, when John Reed commits suicide, that protection and stand-in father figure vanish, leaving the sisters vulnerable. This vulnerability is only increased by the death of their mother. Although their options are very limited, it is implied that the sisters are educated to some extent and, upon the death of their family, both have sure notions of their futures: Eliza will join a nunnery and Georgianna will go to London where she will be received by her uncle, Mr. Gibson, and eventually marry (Brontë 241). This would mean that while Eliza and Georgianna's father died many years previous, upon Georgianna's move to London her uncle would act as her father figure, caring for her and ensuring a successful marriage. Depending on the extent of their educations, apart from living with extended family, joining the church, or marrying, the only respectable option for the sisters to remain respectably within their social class would be to work as governesses.

After her childhood at Gateshead and Lowood, Jane matures into a young woman who is educated well enough to serve as a teacher or governess. This is the route Jane decides to pursue due to her estrangement from the Reed family and lack of immediate family. Had she not received that education at Lowood, her only other option would have been marriage, and because she does not have a father or dowry, her marriageability would have given her very limited and unfavorable options. Joining the church would not have been a possibility because she is a Protestant, not Catholic. For this reason, when Jane becomes an adult, she chooses to become the governess of Thornfield to Edward Rochester's young ward, Adèle Varens. Orphaned as a young child, Adèle is being raised by Mr. Rochester because her mother was unmarried and left Adèle without family. While Adèle's life at Thornfield isn't full of abuse and neglect, Daniel Pool, author of *What Jane Austen*

Ate And Charles Dicken Knew, states that "once you became an orphan there was no official apparatus to take care of you except the workhouse" (235). Adèle, having no real father, is very fortunate to have been taken in by Mr. Rochester. Having no relations and being too young to be well educated, the "absent father" in Adèle's life may have led her to suffer a fate of poverty and potential prostitution had Mr. Rochester not chosen to take her in. However, it is Rochester's decision to raise Adèle, like Mr. Reed's decision to raise Jane, that has given her the patriarchal protection necessary to move within English society. Adèle, unlike Jane, is given a good English education from early childhood on and raised under the impression that she will eventually make a successful marriage. Jane, on the other hand, is not educated until her later childhood and teenage years, therefore the charity school has prepared her for her only option: becoming a governess. This contrast illustrates the stark difference in realities between a young girl in Victorian England who had patriarchal protection and those who did not.

While at Thornfield, Jane is also contrasted against the character of Blanche Ingram, the sophisticated and beautiful woman looking to marry Mr. Rochester. Unlike Jane, who wishes to marry Rochester because she has emotional feelings for him, Blanche's desire for marriage stems from a more practical state of mind. Blanche has very little dowry and no father, and because of her place in society, she does not wish to leave her home to work as a governess or teacher. Realistically, Blanche needs a husband to provide and protect her, as she no longer has a father figure to provide that for her.

This is very different from the situation of Rosamond Oliver, who does have a living and present father figure. Rosamond comes from a family of money; this can be seen when Rosamond volunteers to be the benefactress of the school for impoverished girls that Jane oversees. Although she is of age to marry and has the patriarchal protection of her father, she has not married and is not in a rush to marry.

She is in love with the missionary St. John Rivers, Jane's cousin, despite his lack of money and, if given the choice, would marry him. Her future marriage is not completely dependent upon money or class; her father has already established her in society. When St. John refuses to marry her and leaves to become a missionary, Rosamond has many suitors and is able to choose the one she pleases because of her father's beliefs and protection. Rosamond's situation is used to directly contrast the lives of the many other women in the novel, including Jane, in order to call attention to the trials and tribulations faced by women in Victorian society.

Brontë's continued contrast of Jane to the other women of the novel in relation to their father's absence or presence serves as a call for reform in the rights of women. The contrast functions in this way because it portrays several different women in relation to their absent or present father figure and describes the difficulties for women that relationship can create. Jane serves as the primary motivation for this call to reform. As Moglen says, "Orphaned, poor, and plain, faced with the pressures of making her own way in a world which measured the likelihood of her success by the degree of her marriageability (her familial connections, her economic status, and, above all, her beauty), Jane tests the limits of social, moral, and psychological possibility, discovering the kinds of power which are in fact available to a woman," (106-107). Brontë uses the novel *Jane Eyre* to call attention to the lack of power women have in society, and to emphasize the disparity of the repercussions women face as a result of the patriarchy and women's dependence upon father figures in order to establish successful futures.

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